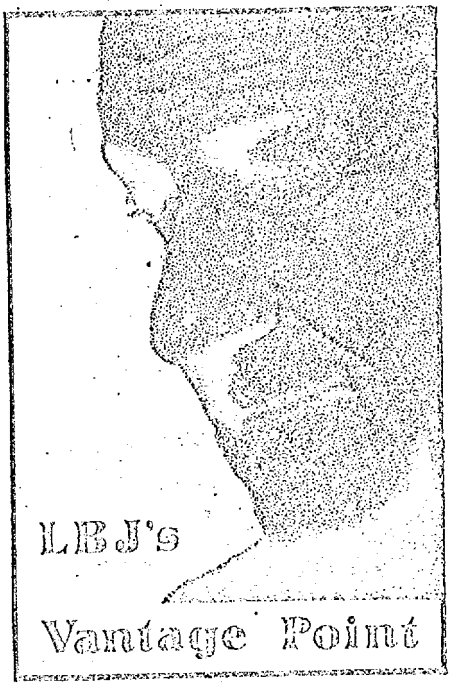
WASHINGTON POST
24 OCT 1971
Approved For Release 2004/11/01 : CIA-RDP88-01350R000200750015-6

Johnson, Lyndon B.
Sec. 5, Vol. 2, The Vantage Point
Helms, Richard

Day the Hot Line Rang: A Crisis in the Mideast

This is the eighth of 15 excerpts from former President Johnson's book, "The Vantage Point," an account of his presidency, to be published shortly.



"THE SIX-DAY WAR"

Just before eight o'clock on the morning of June 5, 1967, the telephone rang in my bedroom at the White House. Bob McNamara was calling with a message never heard before by an American President. "Mr. President," he said, "the hot line is up."

The hot line is a special teletype circuit linking Moscow and Washington. The technicians call it Molink. Its purpose is to provide instant communications betwen the Soviet leaders and the American President in times of grave crisis in order to minimize the dangers of delay and misunderstanding.

McNamara's words were ominous, given the background against which they were spoken. Three and one-half hours before, at 4:35 a.m., Walt Rostow had awakened me with the news that war had erupted in the Middle East.

On May 14, 1967, Nasser mobilized his armed forces. Two days later Egypt asked the United Nations to withdraw its peacekeeping force in the Sinai. In an action that shocked me then, and that still puzzles me, Secretary General U Thant announced that UN forces could not remain in the Sinai without Egyptian approval. Even the Egyptians were surprised. Nasser's Ambassador in Washington told us that his government thought and hoped that U Thant would play for time. But he did not, and tension increased.

I knew that on February 26, 1957, Secretary of State Dulles had informed President Eisenhower in a memorandum "that Israel had been assured that a purpose of the United Nations Emergency Force would be to restrain the exercise of belligerent rights which would prevent passage through the Straits of Tiran." I wanted to know precisely how Eisenhower had viewed the matter at that time, so I sought his views and invited any statement he might care to make. General Eisenhower sent me a message stating his view that the Israelis' right of access to the Gulf of Aqaba was definitely part of the "commitment" we had made to them.

On the evening of May 26 I met with Israel's Foreign Minister Abba Eban, who had just flown to Washington. Our conversation was direct and frank. Eban said that according to Israeli intelligence, the United Arab Republic (UAR) was preparing an all-out attack.

I asked Secretary McNamara, who was present, to give Mr. Eban a summary of our findings. Three separate intelligence groups had looked carefully into the matter, McNamara said, and it was our best judgment that a UAR attack was not imminent. "All of our intelligence people are unanimous," I added, "that if the UAR attacks, you will whip hell out of them."

Eban asked what the United States was willing to do to keep the Gulf of Aqaba open. I reminded him that I had defined our position on May 23. We were hard at work on what to do to assure free access, and when to do it. "You can assure the Israeli Cabinet," I said, "we will pursue vigorously any and all possible measures to keep the strait open."

I pointed out that we had to try to work through the United Nations first. "If it should become apparent that the UN is ineffective," I said, "then Israel and her friends, including the United States, who are willing to stand up and be counted can give specific and indication of what they can do."

I told him that I saw some hope in the plan for an international naval force in the strait area, but that before such a proposal could be effective I had to be sure Congress was on board. "I am fully aware of what three past Presidents have said," I told Eban, "but that is not worth five cents if the people and the Congress do not sup[illegible]

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experience that the situation would be worse if the Congress started out supporting Israel and then found excuses to turn tail and run if the going got rough. Some Senators who had been in the vanguard with me on Southeast Asia were already looking for a storm cellar, and I did not want a repetition of this faintheartedness in the Middle East.

Abba Eban is an intelligent and sensitive man. I wanted him to understand the U.S. position fully and clearly, and to communicate what I said to his government. "The central point, Mr. Minister," I told him, "is that your nation not be the one to bear the responsibility for any outbreak of war." Then I said very slowly and very positively: "Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go alone."

Before U.S. military forces could be involved in any way, I was determined to ask Congress for a resolution supporting such a move. I was convinced that Congress would approve the resolution if there seemed to be no alternative, but such a vote of confidence would not be easy to obtain. There were those on Capitol Hill who would willingly exploit the situation for political advantage. In a joint memorandum to me Rusk and McNamara observed: "While it is true that many Congressional Vietnam doves may be in the process of conversion to Israeli hawks . . . an effort to get a meaningful resolution from the Congress runs the risk of becoming bogged down in acrimonious dispute."

At the very least, I knew that the Congress would not move until we had exhausted all other diplomatic remedies, through the United Nations and outside it. This was also true of the White House. I was opposed to using force until I was persuaded that every other avenue was blocked. And we were moving rapidly to explore every possibility.

With the British, we sought widespread support for a declaration affirming the right of innocent passage through the Gulf of Aqaba. This was slow work. By June 4 only eight countries had agreed, and they included the United States, Great Britain, and Israel. The others were the Netherlands, Australia, Iceland, Belgium, and New Zealand. Five other nations — West Germany, Argentina, Portugal, Canada, and Panama — were still studying the proposition, but we felt they were nearing agreement.

During that final weekend of uneasy quiet Rusk sent cables to all our Ambassadors in Arab capitals urging them to "put your minds to possible solutions which can prevent war." He informed the Ambassadors that we had thus far been able to convince the Israelis to hold back, but that they might be nearing a decision to use force. "It will do no good," his message said, "to ask Israel simply to accept the present status quo in the Strait, because Israel cannot constrain her,

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